

better to have been with than live without it by 152glasslippers

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Summary:

After everything that happened, Nancy had promised her mother she would always let her know where she was going, where she could find her, but she didn't want to wake her tonight. Karen would never approve. And maybe with good reason.

Maybe more than one good reason.

Character study of Nancy and a peak at what her life might have been like those first few months after they found Will. Complete with Nancy and Mike feels, an ode to Karen Wheeler, and Jancy bed sharing to overcome traumatic nightmares.

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Author's Note:

In honor of Stranger Things 2 tomorrow (!!!) I finally finished the Jancy wip I've had lying around for the past year. Canon divergent because I started writing it long before the recent trailers came out.

She didn't dream about Jonathan at first.

She dreamed about everyone else: Mike, his friends, Barb, Holly, their mom, Eleven—even Hopper made an appearance—one or all of them taken from her, trapped in that other place. Sometimes she was the one taken. She pushed her hand through the tree and no one caught it. It wasn't a deer, but Barb they found in the woods, bloody and whimpering, before she was snatched away again.

The dreams where nothing happened, where she picked up the phone and called Barb and they talked about the new sweater she bought or the chemistry quiz the next day or the movie they saw last weekend—those were the cruelest. Those were the nights she woke up crying, folded in on herself, the loss of Barb a physical weight, pressing against her chest, constricting her lungs.

Some nights Mike heard her crying, crept across the hall and lay down next to her, studying her bedspread while she cried herself out.

The nights she couldn't sleep always seemed to be the same nights Mike could, Eleven and Will just out of reach in his dreams, and Nancy would rush into his room as soon as she heard him, shake him awake and push him over, the two of them squeezed into the bottom bunk. Sometimes Mike appeared in her room, eyes red and cheeks wet, and she held him as tightly as she could.

Neither of them locked their doors anymore.

But she could never bring herself to wake Mike if he wasn't already up, so she started doing something she hadn't done since she was ten: tiptoeing down the hall into her mom's room, nudging her awake

with a hand on her shoulder until she moved over to the middle of the bed and Nancy could crawl in beside her.

More than once, Mike came looking for Nancy when she was already in their mom's room, and their dad would wake up, grumbling at all the rustling, and leave to sleep in the La-Z-Boy downstairs. Mike happily took his spot.

Their mom knew what the chief and Mrs. Byers had decided to tell her: Nancy and Mike had been instrumental in helping find Will. Mike had indeed hidden a girl in the basement, a runaway from a dangerous home. She was now in the care of social services, and the stress of saying goodbye to her and losing Barb—even in the face of finding Will—had left its scars.

Karen Wheeler was not a stupid woman. It's not like Nancy thought her mom didn't have more questions than the lies and half-truths they gave her could answer. But maybe her mom understood just how big and terrifying the truth really was because after that, she never asked.

Those first few months after they got Will back, Nancy tried to pretend that nothing had changed, that she could fall back into her old life. Even if she never left the house without a flashlight, or flinched at loud noises, or kept a gun and a box of bullets stashed in an old shoebox in her closet. Even if she spent her weeknights cooking dinner with her mom and her weekends grocery shopping with her and baby Holly. Even if she stopped doing her homework in her bedroom and started working downstairs in the basement with Mike, the small table littered with their textbooks and notebooks and Mike's plans for his next campaign, his radio perpetually switched on, filling the room with white noise.

Even if all those things were true, she could still be the same old Nancy.

And she was, for a while. Until Barb's birthday.

Barb would never be older than 16. But in a few months, Nancy would. And just like that, she knew she couldn't pretend anymore.

She broke up with Steve two weeks later. Her mom was the first person she told. Mike was the second.

The week after she broke up with him, she finally told her mom that the sleeping bag had been for Jonathan. She felt like she was admitting to more than the sleeping bag when she said it, but she wasn't sure what exactly. She didn't tell her that he hadn't used it.

And then, three weeks later, a month after the break up, she dreamt about him.

It wasn't a coincidence. Whatever part of her brain that allowed her to play at being normal for so long had kept Jonathan carefully locked away from her subconscious. Because to dream about Jonathan, to acknowledge everything he'd been to her and everything they'd been to each other—everything she might want them to be—was to accept that the old Nancy didn't exist anymore.

There were good dreams. The two of them together in the dark room, bathed in red, pictures of Mike and Will and Dustin and Lucas, Eleven, Barb, his mom and Hopper, drying on the walls. A walk through the woods. Driving in his car.

Sleeping in her bed.

Those were the lucky nights. The nights she slept better than she had in months.

But if her dreams about Jonathan were better than any others she had, then her nightmares about him were her worst.

Alone in the woods, in that other place, desperately calling for him without the echo of his voice calling back. Lost and even more terrified without the reassuring weight of him pressed to her side as the monster fell through the ceiling in his living room. Tommy and Steve beating him unconscious in the alleyway.

That one felt intimately real.

The night she woke herself up screaming was the night she watched the monster knock Jonathan to the floor and tear him apart. She'd been screaming his name.

She sat up, straining her ears to hear over the sound of her own heavy breathing, her blood pounding, for the sound of footsteps. Waiting for Mike or her mom to push open the door to check on her. But the house was quiet. She looked at her clock. 1:56 am.

She lay back down, curled up on her side, her eyes on the spot Jonathan had slept that night.

It was just a dream. He's fine. It was just a dream.

She repeated it to herself on a loop, over and over again, trying to lull herself back to sleep, even though she already knew it wouldn't work. She knew what she needed to fall asleep: Jonathan, in her bed, his voice low in the quiet of her room; tangible, tactile evidence that he was safe and alive.

But calling wasn't an option. She couldn't risk waking up his mom or Will, and even if she didn't wake them, she couldn't ask him to come over or stay on the phone until she was satisfied he was real. She didn't think she had the right to anymore. If she ever had.

They'd barely spoken in the months since that week in November, just small smiles and a soft 'hey' whenever they saw each other in the hallway or when they stopped by to pick up their brothers.

She twisted around to look at the clock again. 2:37. She flopped onto her back, staring at the ceiling. The silence of the house pressed down on her eardrums.

Screw this.

After everything that happened, Nancy had promised her mother she would always let her know where she was going, where she could find her, but she didn't want to wake her tonight. Karen would never approve. And maybe with good reason.

Maybe more than one good reason.

But Nancy had to go. Even if she couldn't fully explain why.

She left two notes. One on her pillow, one on the kitchen counter. She didn't lie.

Mom—

Couldn't sleep. Took the car to the Byers'. Be back before school. I love you.

Nancy

She left her pajamas on. Threw on a jacket and boots. Not a great look, but she wasn't trying to impress anyone anymore. And the one person she planned on seeing had seen her look worse.

She closed her eyes as she turned the key in the ignition, praying it didn't wake anyone in the house. She let the car roll out of the driveway, lights off, and didn't turn them on until she reached the next block. Hated turning them off when she reached the end of the lane that led to the Byers' house. She'd known when she'd decided to come here that this would be the worst part: The stretch of darkness from the spot where she parked her car to the side of the house with Jonathan's window.

She walked carefully, the ground sagging underneath her boots, still damp from the first spring rain, muffling her footsteps. Every breath was a conscious inhale and exhale, an even effort. She reached Jonathan's window and stopped. The first-floor window was still too high for her to reach. She looked at the ground, at the brush uncovered by the final thaw.

He stumbled to the window after the fifth stick she threw. She caught a shadow of his movement through the glass before he opened it. He wasn't wearing a shirt.

She told herself the flush on her cheeks was just from the cold.

"Nancy?"

At first, she thought the look on his face, the crease between his eyebrows, was confusion. She swallowed, regretting ever even considering coming here.

“Hi.”

The silence lingered. He blinked at her, but he didn't ask why she was there. And then she understood the look on his face. It wasn't confusion. It was disbelief.

“Meet me at the front door.”

She crept back around the side of the house to the porch, tiptoed up the wooden steps. She stood there less than a second before he opened the door, pulling it wide without a word. He'd put a t-shirt on.

She brushed her boots lightly on the mat, stepped inside. She still wasn't used to how the house looked without Christmas lights. She felt like she could still see them.

Jonathan shut the door behind her with a gentle thump. They looked at each other for a moment, his face calm, before heading for the hall and his room. She followed.

Another door shut quietly behind her.

“I'm sorry,” she said immediately.

“What are you sorry for?” He sat on the edge of his bed. She could feel her boots dampening the carpet beneath her feet.

“This. Me. Coming here. The middle of the night...” She dropped her eyes to the carpet.

“It's okay.”

She looked back up at him. And because he was looking back at her, she told him. “I had a dream.” *I watched you get eaten alive.* “I couldn't call.” *Say it, Nancy.* “I needed to see you.”

He nodded. His eyes fell to her shoulders.

“I can take your coat. And you can take off your boots.”

He went to the closet to hang up her jacket, and she unlaced her

shoes, moved them to the wall next to the door. Her feet sank into the wet footprints she'd left behind, and she took her socks off, too, stuffed them into her boots. She wrapped her arms around her waist and looked around the room, taking it in. Will's bedroom was the only one she'd been in the night they... That night.

"It's a lot messier than yours." He was looking around the room like he was trying to see how she saw it. Nancy shook her head.

"It looks like you." She glanced at him, smiled.

For the first time, the silence that followed was awkward. She was staring at the floor just to avoid staring at his bed in the middle of the room. She was acutely aware of his boxers and his t-shirt and her pajamas and her bare feet.

"Nancy?"

She looked up at him, waited for his next question, his next sentence, his next word. His eyes searched hers, and there was a slight tension around his mouth, as if there were a thousand things he wanted to say, but couldn't decide which one. Finally—

"Do you want to sleep on the right side again?"

"What?"

"Of the bed. Do you want the right side again?"

Again. Because this wasn't the first time they'd shared a bed.

"Sure." It was barely a whisper.

They started toward the bed in unison. The shade was open on the window, and she realized that it had been when she'd gotten there. It seemed intentional: White moonlight poured into the room, filling almost every corner, illuminating every inch of the bed.

Jonathan turned to his bedside table, resetting his alarm. She hesitated, just briefly, as she sat down on the edge of the bed. The sheets and blankets were pushed down toward the end. Jonathan had slept on top of the blankets in her bed. Was she supposed to do the

same? If she pulled the blankets up over herself, would he sleep on top of them?

As soon as she thought it, she knew she didn't want him to. She wanted to wrap herself up with him, create their own safe space. Warm, just the two of them.

Her toes were cold. She settled for tucking her feet under the edge of the blankets as she lay down on her side, facing the middle of the bed. Let Jonathan decide.

He climbed in next to her, reaching for the edge of the blanket covering her feet, his fingers brushing her leg. He pulled the covers up over her shoulder, before lying down facing her, and pulling the rest of the blankets up over himself.

She took a deep breath. The first in a long time.

Her eyes drifted shut on the exhale and when she opened them, he was watching her again. He did that a lot. She'd almost forgotten. She looked at their hands next to their faces, inches apart.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She didn't. She just wanted to look at him, feel him, until she fell asleep. She shook her head. Slipped her hand in between his. She felt some of the tension leave his body as his hand rested more heavily on hers. She imagined their scars lining up.

"Don't stay awake all night and not wake me," he whispered. The unspoken 'like last time' hung in the air between them.

"I won't." She smiled at him, at the memory of him in her bed, his even breathing, the uninterrupted hours she'd spent watching him, trying to understand how everything had led to that moment.

He squeezed her hand now, smiling his rare, lopsided smile. It gave her just enough courage to settle into the pillow and close her eyes. She wanted his smile to be the last thing she saw.

For the first time in months, she didn't dream.

Author's Note:

Thanks for reading!